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ABSTRACT

Confined to the interaction of subject sex with stimulus complexity, this paper reports a portion of the results of an experimental study which hypothesized a series of relationships between theatre audience members' information-processing abilities and their responses to complex and simple plays. The subjects for the study were 60 female and 30 male undergraduates in six sections of speech and English classes at Bowling Green State University, selected on the basis of the fact that they were in the first and fourth quartiles of the score distributions on the Rep Test. The plays chosen for the study were "The Homecoming" by Harold Pinter and "Private Lives" by Noel Coward. "The Homecoming" was judged to be the more complex play. It was concluded that females in this study preferred "Private Lives" to "The Homecoming." Further, the theatre can be a useful laboratory for studying perception, attitude, and behavior phenomena to discover techniques and methodologies that facilitate further explorations of human behavior. (RB)

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INFORMATION PROCESSING IN THE THEATRE: SEX DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSES TO THE HOMECOMING AND PRIVATE LIVES

by

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Introduction.

This paper reports a portion of the results of an experimental study which hypothesized a series of relationships between theatre audience members' information-processing abilities and their responses to complex and simple plays. Although the entire experiment included three independent variables (cognitive complexity of subjects; sex of subjects; complexity/simplicity of the stimulus play), this report is confined to the interaction of subject sex with stimulus complexity.

Theatrical experiences have generally not been explored in an information-processing context. It is belaboring the obvious to suggest that an audience at any play is likely to manifest a variety of responses to the performance, or to point out that different "kinds" of plays seem to appeal to different "kinds" of people. Most of the time, however, we have seemed content to attribute such variations to "individual differences" among auditors or to some undefined "ability to understand the dramatic moment," etc. All very macroscopic. We have not sought to explore characteristics either of plays or of people experiencing them which might account more precisely for such response variations. Perhaps one of the most obvious of the "people characteristics" susceptible of such study is sex. We are in the midst of what appears to be a major revolution of our attitudes and knowledges about differences and similarities between the sexes, yet theatre researchers have been negligent in considering possible response differences between females and males. Morgan's 1950 dissertation--a behavioral study of females' and males' responses to specific kinds of dramatic situations--appears to have been a lonely effort.

Recent psychological studies involving sex differences, while not

theatre-related, have suggested the possibility of generating research questions pertinent to information processing and sex differentiation. Irwin, et. al. in 1967 demonstrated that females made finer distinctions than did males when rating persons on the Role Concept Repertory Test. A 1970 study by Soucar, however, apparently reversed that finding: boys made finer distinctions than did girls when rating negatively-valenced teachers. (Attempting to explain this result, the author failed to suggest the possibility that in this culture females are taught to be less critical than males.) Bellante (1970) found some significant relationships between empathic response and sex in adolescents. Bugental, et. al. (1970) discovered that grade-school children were adept at perceiving verbal/nonverbal incongruences in messages transmitted by adults, and that their perceptions were especially acute when females were the transmitters. Miller and Bacon (1971) showed differences in females' and males' perceptions and receptions of sexy pictures, but their research focus was on the closed-mindedness/open-mindedness continuum.

Deriving largely from the Personal Construct Theory of George Kelly, the information-processing view of human personality has been articulated by such researchers as Bieri (1955), Fiske and Maddi (1961), and Schroder and Suedfeld (1971). Investigation in this area has been given major impetus by Bieri and others in studying the concept of cognitive complexity/simplicity, which postulates an intra-personal continuum of information-processing ability.

In addition to person complexity, much of the literature deals with stimulus complexity, as well as with relationships between the two. Since the Barron-Welsh studies of the 1950's which demonstrated correlations between subject complexity and stimulus complexity when subjects rated art works or indicated preferences for certain kinds of paintings, studies in

perception and information processing have continued to explore both person complexity and stimulus complexity (Leventhal, 1957; Leventhal and Singer, 1964; Sieber and Lanzetta, 1964; Miller and Bieri, 1965; Irwin, Tripodi, and Bieri, 1967; Grove and Eisenman, 1970; Wilkins and Epting, 1971).

Research Question.

Considering at this point the provocative possibility of a meaningful congruence between subject sex and plays that might be considered "complex" versus plays that might be considered "simple," this paper focuses specifically on the question, "What relationships, if any, can be found to exist between the sex of audience members and their perceptions of complex and simple dramatic stimuli?"

Independent Variable: Stimulus Complexity.

Although there presently exists no instrument capable of measuring the total "complexity" of a dramatic production, studies have indicated that assessments of entropy/redundancy of written material can be employed as indicators of relative complexity (Emmert and Brooks, 1970), and that "Cloze" procedures are useful devices for quantifying degrees of entropy/redundancy. To select two plays as treatments in this experiment, an entropy test was applied to the playscripts of Harold Pinter's The Homecoming and Noel Coward's Private Lives. Results supported the hypothesis ($p < .01$) that The Homecoming would be judged as the more entropic, or complex, play and that Private Lives would emerge as the more redundant, or simpler, script. Subjects' exposure to the two plays in production constituted the two levels of stimulus complexity.

Dependent Measures.

7-step semantic differentials and Likert-type "agree-disagree" scales were used to measure the effects of the independent variables. SD scales

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have been widely used in theatre research, especially since the appearance in 1961 of Raymond Smith's "Semantic Differential for Theatre Concepts." The literature abounds with evaluations of the methodologies associated therewith (see, for example, Thayer, 1964; Framsen, et. al., 1965; Clevenger, et. al.,1967; Hansen and Bormann, 1969; Tucker, 1971; Addington, et. al., 1971). The 13-scale differential used in the present research we taken from Hansen and Bormann (1969):

Worthless - Valuable
Excitable - Calm
False - True
Serious - Humorous
Masculine - Feminine
Far - Near
Dynamic - Static
Deep - Shallow
Complex - Simple
Colorless - Colorful
Honest - Dishonest
Light - Heavy
Tense - Relaxed

Likert-type scales were included in an effort to determine to what extent they might provide more specific kinds of information about subjects' perceptions of particular features of the performed plays. A set of 20 items was developed following study of the scripts and during observation of rehearsals as the production of The Homecoming neared its opening night:

1. The more complicated a play is, the more interesting it is.
2. The arrangement of the furniture is appropriate to the play.
3. This play appeals mostly to intellectuals.
4. The stage lighting for the play was effective.
5. Even when I couldn't understand the dialogue, the characters' movements helped me understand what was going on.
6. This play is boring.
7. This play is too strange to be anything like real life.
8. It is foolish to try to interpret this play.
9. This play communicates effectively.
10. This play is confusing.
11. This play is a comedy.
12. One person's opinion is as good as another's, when it comes to interpreting plays.

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13. This play is carefully structured.
14. The characters' costumes were appropriate to the play.
15. A worthwhile play makes the audience work at trying to figure it out.
16. This research project irritates me.
17. I enjoyed this play.
18. The pre-show and intermission music fit the play.
19. There were too many long silences in the play.
20. These characters are crazy.

Procedures.

Subjects were 60 female and 30 male undergraduates in six sections of Speech and English classes at Bowling Green State University, selected on the basis of first and fourth quartiles of their score distributions on the Rep Test. They were required, as a condition of their enrollments in the respective courses, to attend performances of both plays. The Homecoming was produced during the week of April 26, 1972; Private Lives in the week of May 10, 1972. Immediately following each performance, subjects in attendance reported to a previously-designated room in the theatre building, where they occupied themselves for approximately 40 minutes completing the dependent measurement instruments. After all data were collected, subjects were thoroughly debriefed.

Multivariate data analyses were executed throughout the study. Each set of dependent measures was first principal-factors analyzed. Minimum strength criterion for acceptance was a factor loading of 0.450; the purity criterion required that a scale's factor loading be at least twice the same scale's loading on any other factor. Ten of the 13 SD scales and nine of the 20 Likert scales emerged as salient; scale and factor arrays are displayed in Tables 1 and 2 of the Appendix.

The factor-analyzed SD and Likert scales were then subjected to separate multivariate analyses of variance and, in each analysis, signif-

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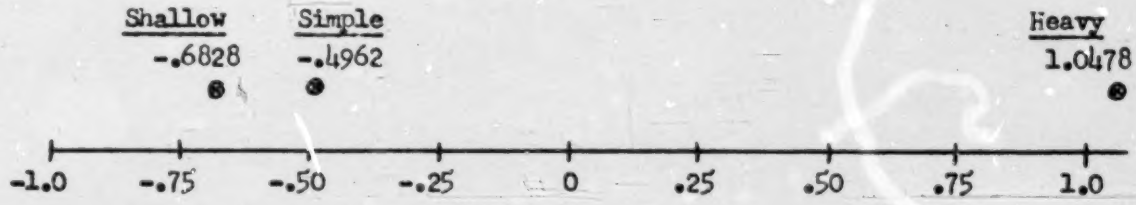
icant F-ratios ($p < .05$) indicated interaction effects between subject sex and stimulus complexity. These results are displayed in the Appendix, Tables 3 and 4. Post-significance examinations were achieved through the use of discriminant analysis.

Results.

Discriminant analysis of the Entropy x Sex interaction deriving from the semantic differential scales (Appendix, Table 5) showed a dimension of perception characterized by high loadings on two of the discriminant function coefficients, but dominated by a high positive loading on the scale "Heavy-Light." The negative polarities of the other two loadings indicate that their referents are near the negative ends of the original scales--"Shallow" and "Simple." Constructing a graph of the discriminant function coefficients provides the clearest picture of each variable's contribution to between-groups differences:



The zero-point is the base-point, as in a normal distribution. The construct "Shallow," at the extreme negative end of the graph, is contributing markedly to between-groups differences, but the construct "Heavy," at the extreme positive end of the graph and with an absolute value of over 1½ times that of "Shallow," is the principal differentiator. If we construe "Shallow" to mean "of small consequence," "lacking in substance," etc., and if we interpret "Heavy" as meaning such things as "momentous," "significant,"

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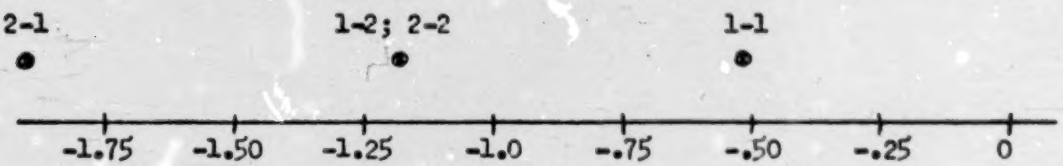
"important," etc. (relying for that interpretation upon contemporary meanings, used especially by post-adolescents, for the word "heavy"), it then seems reasonable to characterize this graph as representing a "dimension of importance." In other words, the ways in which the dependent variable scores have grouped themselves suggest that subjects were responding to the two plays along a "dimension of perceived importance."

Looking next at the cell centroids (Appendix, Table 5), it is clear that differences among cells resulted largely from females' perceptions of The Homecoming and Private Lives along this "dimension of importance." Male subjects did not differentiate between the two plays: centroids for cells 1-2 and 2-2 are identical (-1.1700). Again, a graph provides perhaps the best means of illustrating between-cells differences:



Closest to the zero-point is the Homecoming x Females cell (1-1); farthest distant from the zero-point is the Private Lives x Females cell (2-1). These phenomena suggest that females considered The Homecoming as "possessing" the smallest "quantity" of "importance," and that they considered Private Lives as "possessing" the greatest "quantity" of "importance." Reactions of both male cells fell approximately halfway between the two female cells.

Discriminant analysis of the Entropy x Sex interaction deriving from the Likert-type scales revealed a dimension of perception whose highest loading is on the coefficient for item P_3, "I enjoyed this play." (See

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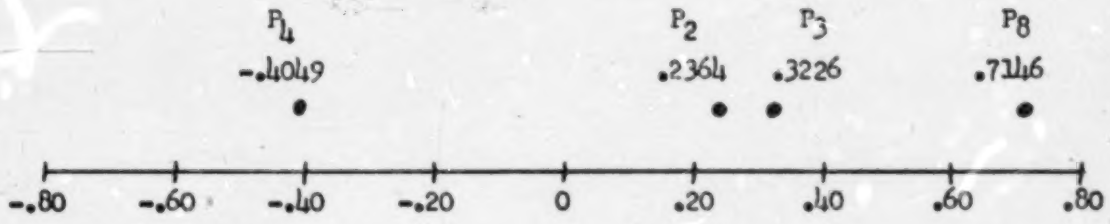
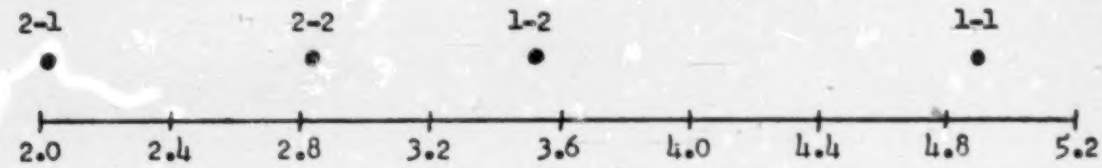
Appendix, Table 6.) Because of the way in which subject scores on these items were input to the computer for analysis (the "agree" end of each 7-step scale receiving a score of 1, and the "disagree" end receiving a score of 7), the positive loading of the coefficient indicates subject disagreement with the item. The discriminant function is, therefore, dominated by the reverse assertion: "I did not enjoy this play." Graphing the function illustrates the variables' contributions to the dimension:



The dimension is dominated by variable P_8 ("I did not enjoy this play"), and its opposite end is represented by variable P_4 ("This play is confusing"). It seems legitimate, therefore, to characterize the graph as representing a "dimension of non-enjoyment."

Examination of the cell centroids (Table 6) reveals a pattern remarkably similar to the centroid pattern along the "dimension of importance" discussed above: the greatest differential magnitude appears between the two female cells (1-1 and 2-1), with the two male cells falling approximately halfway between. Graphic illustration:



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Female subjects apparently perceived The Homecoming (cell 1-1) as "possessing" the greatest "quantity" of "non-enjoyment," and they perceived Private Lives (cell 2-1) as "possessing" the smallest "quantity" of "non-enjoyment." In other words, females "enjoyed" The Homecoming much less than they did Private Lives.

Discussion.

One of the reasons for having included the sex variable in this study was the fact of increased awareness in our culture of sex-based discriminatory behavior, often directed toward females, but perhaps equally as often practiced by females. It is possible to view both The Homecoming and Private Lives as dealing with female-male issues that have been characterized as "sexist." The mother-virgin-whore image, long a stereotype in the literature of western "civilization" and, many people today would insist, long also a cultural stereotype with its own set of mandated behaviors for both sexes, can be applied to Ruth, as she is perceived by the male characters in The Homecoming. With the possible exception of Sam, all of the male characters in that play can be viewed as sexists because of their behaviors and attitudes toward women. In Private Lives, too, the contrast between Amanda and Sibyl (as well as the male characters' treatments of both women) can be seen as exemplary of some of the controversies underlying the current women's movement. Amanda is relatively free sexually, is perfectly capable of caring for herself in a male-dominated world (though certainly she must manipulate the surrounding males in order to achieve her ends), and she would hardly be characterized as a quintessentially "domestic" sort of woman. Sibyl, on the other hand, is almost entirely dependent upon a male to take care of her--indeed, the script contains references to Sibyl's

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female parent such that it is legitimate to assume that Sibyl has gone "from one nest to another" with no intervening time for getting herself together and dealing autonomously with the world. She is certainly not sexually liberated, even by the standards of her own era, and her image is generally that of the "helpless female."

It was felt initially that, given the contemporary climate of attitudes and behaviors toward women in our culture, these two plays might stimulate in female spectators some reactions of a different character, or more intense reactions, than those of male spectators. Results suggest that such reactions did indeed occur.

Females in this study preferred Private Lives to The Homecoming. They preferred the simpler play to the more complex play. Apparently there were features of the information transmitted by these two plays which caused females to process Private Lives in a more positive way than The Homecoming.

It will be assumed here, if only for the purpose of generating arguments, that it is possible to view these two plays such that although both can be seen as incorporating features of sexism, The Homecoming is the more offensive of the two in this regard. Private Lives seems unequivocally intended as a "comedy," and the ease, in contemporary American society, with which we are able to apply that label to a play parallels the case with which we are able to regard that play as relatively inoffensive. We are accustomed to viewing "comedy" as something which by definition does little more than mirror the most innocuous of our societal behaviors, personal interactions, etc. Private Lives is, in addition, set in a period of time which is relatively distant from--and therefore relatively irrelevant to--most of the students who served as subjects in this study. The contention here is that

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although it is possible to view Private Lives as a "good example" of a sexist orientation to the treatment of women, these subjects did not view it in that manner as much as they did The Homecoming.

The Homecoming is probably not so easily defined as a "comedy." It contains what we traditionally think of as comedic elements, but it also deals with human viciousness in ways which may be decidedly unfunny, and much of that viciousness is sex-related. In Lenny's first scene with Ruth, for example, he describes what may be a real experience, a fantasy, or some schizoid admixture, when he talks about his encounter with a woman "down by the docks." We are led to believe that the woman was a whore--representative of Lenny's general view of woman's proper station--and that, under ordinary circumstances, Lenny might have accepted her solicitation, except that she was "falling apart with the pox." According to Lenny, her insistence enraged him, and he considered murdering her. Finally deciding, however, that killing her would create certain logistic inconveniences, Lenny simply gave her "another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that." If that scene leaves doubts in the spectator's mind about Lenny's attitude toward women, his final line in the sequence does not. When Ruth asks how he knew that the woman was diseased, Lenny replies, "I decided she was."

Ruth's introduction to Max prompts the old man to a vicious diatribe on the subject of what he imagines to be her state of morality: "Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house? . . . We've had a smelly scrubber in my house all night. We've had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night." Etc.

The Homecoming was identified as the more complex (entropic) of the

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two plays, meaning in turn that the information carried by its production may have been less easy for the subjects to process--may have been less predictable than Private Lives. References to the dead wife and mother, Jessie, are alternately sentimentally maudlin and sexually vicious: Max refers to Jessie at one moment as "the backbone to this family . . . a woman at home with a will of iron, a heart of gold and a mind," and in the next moment as "a slutbitch of a wife." Joey's mother/whore relationship with Ruth is still another ambiguity which may have been perceived as both sexually offensive and difficult to process. If we consider only the treatment of Ruth in the play, it is reasonable to say that most of the male characters regard her as a "sex object" in the most callous fashion, and that this could have been interpreted as offensive or as threatening by many of the female subjects.

The Homecoming is also a modern play, whereas Private Lives can be seen almost as a "period piece," and the former play is thereby more "relevant" to the experiences of the study's subjects. A relevant threat is doubtless more threatening than an irrelevant threat. Conclusion: because females may have been more greatly offended by The Homecoming than by Private Lives, and because they may have experienced greater difficulty in integrating the former play's information because of its relatively greater entropy, they "enjoyed" The Homecoming less. If they "enjoyed" it less, they may have found a need to lower their estimations of its "importance," in much the same fashion as the purchaser of an automotive "lemon" reduces her dissonance by saying, in effect, "The damned thing's no good, anyway!"

An alternative explanation for the differing responses utilizes the obverse of the same "sex-role-conditioning" hypothesis, suggesting that

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subjects were offended or angered by The Homecoming, but that in this instance the source of their displeasure was Ruth's own behavior rather than the behavior of male characters toward Ruth. Despite changes that are occurring in the culture, it seems fair to assert that cultural norms prescribing female role behaviors maintain such notions as that females are expected to be submissive to males, that they are expected to be less aggressive than males, that they are expected to repress (or conceal) meaningful sexuality, that they are expected to be devoted to Kirche, Küche, und Kinder above all else, that they are expected to be incompetent in matters of "business"—in short, that women are expected to maintain role behaviors traditionally associated with passive "femininity" and to eschew behaviors traditionally associated with active "masculinity."

Much of Ruth's behavior contradicts these expectations: she manipulates and dominates Lenny, she engages in actively sexual behavior with Joey (although she is characterized by Lenny in that episode as being a "tease," which characterization doubtless introduces additional entropy into the overall situation), her relationships with home and children are rather more casual than our televised detergent advertisements suggest that they ought to be, she manages to maintain the upper hand in her relationships with the play's male characters despite their callous treatment of her, she "talks dirty," and she proves a shrewd businesswoman when Lenny proposes to set her up as a call girl. Finally, she obviously approves of Lenny's idea, which is perhaps the greatest affront to traditionalists.

Because Ruth's behavior did not conform to these cultural stereotypes, there is good reason to believe that she offended a number of subjects of both sexes. This could account not only for the marked differences in

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females' responses to the two plays, but also for the less-pronounced differences in males' responses on the "dimension of non-enjoyment."

Either argument seems plausible and, indeed, it may be that both phenomena were operating. At this point, one cannot wholeheartedly accept either a "progressive dissonance-reduction hypothesis" or a "regressive dissonance-reduction hypothesis" as an explicand of the observed response variations without further study. The theatre can be a most useful laboratory for studying perception, attitude, and behavior phenomena, however, as we continue to discover techniques and methodologies that facilitate our explorations.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1

SALIENT SCALE AND FACTOR ARRAY: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF 13 SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL ITEMS MEASURING RESPONSES TO BOTH PLAYS (TWO FACTORS EXTRACTED; BOTH SALIENT)

Factor	Scale Designation	Rotated Factor Loading	Next Highest Loading	Estimated Communality
I	1. - Worthless-Valuable +	.849	-.106	.732
	2. + Excitable-Calm -	.733	-.265	.607
	3. - False-True +	.690	-.056	.480
	6. - Far-Near +	.706	-.037	.499
	7. + Dynamic-Static -	.766	-.113	.599
	10. - Colorless-Colorful +	.775	-.198	.640
	11. + Honest-Dishonest -	.684	-.041	.470
II	8. + Deep-Shallow -	.813	.177	.691
	9. + Complex-Simple -	.856	-.070	.737
	12. - Light-Heavy +	.805	-.357	.775

% of Total Variance: Factor I: 37.7; Factor II: 14.5

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TABLE 2

SALIENT SCALE AND FACTOR ARRAY: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF 20 LIKERT ITEMS COMMON TO BOTH PLAYS (TWO FACTORS EXTRACTED; BOTH SALIENT)

Factor		Scale Designation	Rotated Factor Loading	Next Highest Loading	Estimated Communality
I	7.	This play is too strange to be anything like real life.	.758	-.130	.591
	13.	This play is carefully structured.	-.454	.119	.220
	15.	A worthwhile play makes the audience work at trying to figure it out.	-.648	-.268	.492
	16.	This research project irritates me.	.525	.079	.281
	20.	These characters are crazy.	.621	-.219	.433
II	8.	It is foolish to try to interpret this play.	-.614	-.011	.377
	9.	This play communicates effectively.	.781	.320	.713
	10.	This play is confusing.	-.553	-.118	.320
	17.	I enjoyed this play.	.636	-.107	.416

% of Total Variance: Factor I: 23.7; Factor II: 10.6

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TABLE 3

2 x 2 x 2 MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE: FACTOR II OF "PLAY" SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIALS (ENTROPY x SEX x COMPLEXITY)

Source of Variation	d. f.	F-ratio	p less than
A main (Entropy)	3, 170	53.0627	0.0001
B main (Sex)	3, 170	0.3921	0.7589 (N.S.)
C main (Complexity)	3, 170	0.3540	0.7864 (N.S.)
A x B	3, 170	3.0088	0.0318
A x C	3, 170	7.6864	0.0001
B x C	3, 170	1.3861	0.2487 (N.S.)
A x B x C	3, 170	1.4362	0.2340 (N.S.)

TABLE 4

2 x 2 x 2 MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE: FACTOR II OF "PLAY" LIKERT SCALES (ENTROPY x SEX x COMPLEXITY)

Source of Variation	d. f.	F-ratio	p less than
A main (Entropy)	4, 169	30.0292	0.0001
B main (Sex)	4, 169	0.7595	0.5532 (N.S.)
C main (Complexity)	4, 169	3.3809	0.0109
A x B	4, 169	2.9702	0.0211
A x C	4, 169	2.8006	0.0276
B x C	4, 169	1.7613	0.1389 (N.S.)
A x B x C	4, 169	1.0789	0.3685 (N.S.)

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TABLE 5

POST HOC DISCRIMINATION DATA FOR SIGNIFICANT ENTROPY x SEX (A x B INTERACTION) EFFECT, FACTOR II, "PLAY" SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIALS

Estimated Combined Means

Cell	Variable		
	P_6	P_7	P_{10}
1 1	4.571	5.071	4.891
1 2	4.967	5.167	4.567
2 1	3.777	3.280	2.187
2 2	3.467	2.867	2.500

Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients

-.6828*	-.4962	1.0478*

Cell Centroids

1 1 (Homecoming x Females): -.5133

1 2 (Homecoming x Males): -1.1700

2 1 (Private Lives x Females): -1.9073

2 2 (Private Lives x Males): -1.1700

*Maximally discriminating

Variable identification: P_6: + Deep-Shallow -

P_7: + Complex-Simple -

P_{10}: + Heavy-Light -

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TABLE 6

POST HOC DISCRIMINATION DATA FOR SIGNIFICANT ENTROPY x SEX (A x B INTERACTION) EFFECT, FACTOR II, "PLAY" LIKERT SCALES

Estimated Combined Means

Cell	Variable			
	P_2	P_3	P_4	P_8
1 1	3.885	4.637	2.753	4.994
1 2	4.633	3.967	3.633	3.700
2 1	5.140	1.729	4.611	2.994
2 2	5.367	2.200	4.233	3.567

Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients

.2364	.3226	-.4049*	.7146*

Cell Centroids

1	1	(Homecoming x Females):	4.8655
1	2	(Homecoming x Males):	3.5478
2	1	(Private Lives x Females):	2.0444
2	2	(Private Lives x Males):	2.8131

*Maximally discriminating

Variable identification: P_2: It is foolish to try to interpret this play.
P_3: This play communicates effectively.
P_4: This play is confusing.
P_8: I enjoyed this play.